## JAPANESE VERSUS AMERICAN WOMEN – A LIFESTYLE PERSEPCTIVE

The status of women in Japan is changing...slowly. As a result, the gap in attitudes, lifestyle and behavior between Japanese and American women is narrowing. Even so, at this point in contemporary society, Japanese women lag behind their American counterparts in many ways.

Though both Japanese and American women are considered to be fashion savvy and style conscious, in areas that impact the basic fiber of contemporary society differences are evident. Many of the issues Japanese women are currently confronting revolve around home and family life, the work environment, female sexuality and more general societal constraints. Their struggles in these areas are, in many ways, reminiscent of the strife, progress, gains and assertion of independence US women experienced and demonstrated from the late 60's through the 80's.

### Home and Family Life

***Marriage:*** Japanese women's attitudes toward marriage are changing. Women in their 20's and 30's are questioning traditional marital standards and adopting more Western attitudes toward married life. Because Japanese women are less likely to divorce once married than their US counterparts[1], they are waiting longer to marry than previous generations of women in their country[2].

This new attitude toward marriage is creating a breed of Japanese called "new human beings" by older, more traditional members of Japanese society – a breed of more independent working women that is discovering a preference for the freedoms of single life. Though these attitudes are more closely aligned with that of the US, they lag behind the attitudes of US women in today's society.

> *"Chuck Yates, director of the Institute for Education on Japan at Earlham College, said the Kusanos are examples of a new cultural watershed in Japan. 'This group tends to have a world view that is quite different from their parents,' he said. 'Ten years ago when they were junior high school kids, the Japanese called them 'new human beings' because the older generations just didn't understand them."* Source: The Indianapolis Star, Life in Japan, 11/15/99

(1: Divorce rates per thousand 1990; US-4.7, Japanese-1.28)
(2: Average age of 1st marriage in Japan; 1983–25.4, 1995-26.3)

### The Work Environment

***Women in the Work Place:*** Increasingly, Japanese women are *choosing* to work. But, less than one-half of women in Japanese society *are* working[3], contrasted to nearly 60% of US women[4].

(3: Percent of female population in Japanese labor force, 1997; 40% -- The Economist, 3/8/97)
(4: Percent of female population in US labor force, 1997; 59.8% -- Statistical Abstract of the US, 1998)

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/kpwy0004

The recent economic downturn in Japanese society has made it harder for career oriented Japanese women to find rewarding work. As is the case in many cultures, women tend to be the first to get laid off in recessions. This compounds the issue of workplace discrimination in Japan.

Workplace discrimination against women in Japan exists to a much greater degree than is evident in US corporations. Open discrimination against women was outlawed in Japan in 1986. Even so, strong evidence of discriminatory practices continues to exist.

> *"Some recruitment ads still specify 'No women,' says Sakie Fukushima, a Tokyo-based partner at Korn/Ferry International, the world's largest executive search firm. Job interviewers routinely ask female applicants about their 'morals and self-discipline' and question the nature of their sexual relationships."* Source: Working Woman, Women Break Through In Japan, 4/98

Without question, practices still common place in Japan would land US corporations in court.

> *"'My boss told me I was 'handicapped.' I asked exactly what he meant by such a word. His answer was that the 'handicap' was that I was a woman and it was inappropriate for a woman to take such dangerous work." (Traveling on assignment and staying at a 5-star hotel) Source: The Toronto Sun, Sexism, Tokyo-Style, 1/31/99*

> *"Recent (female Japanese) college graduates speak matter-of-factly about being asked questions like 'Do you have a boyfriend?' 'Do you plan to quit your job when you marry?' 'Are you capable of working long hours and being transferred to offices in other cities?' all questions leading up to the most important one: 'Hadn't you better enter the 'ippanshoku' (clerical) track rather than the 'sogoshoku' (career) employment track?'"* Source: Asahi News Service, Firms Lay Down the Law When Hiring Women, 3/6/98

***Female Executives:*** Even with increasing numbers of Japanese women in the work force, gains at the managerial level are slow in coming. US women far outpace their Japanese counterparts in this area.

> *"At 0.2 percent, the representation of female executives in Japan's largest companies is far smaller than that of many other industrialized countries. In comparison, more than 400 of the companies on the Fortune 500 list for the United States employ women in senior management, as do almost half the top 200 companies in Britain, according to Women Board Directors International, a Washington-based nonprofit organization." Source: Denver Post, Career Rare for Japan's Women, Giant Companies Slow to Change, 1/31/99*

Importantly, the recent economic slump in Japan has created more opportunities for businesswomen to excel as did corporate downsizing and rightsizing in the US in the late 80's. In response to the needs of corporations to do more with less, recognition of the need for more multi-tasking and flexible managerial skills grew. More and more women are acknowledged as being stronger in these areas than their male counterparts.

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*"The restructuring of the economy will be as good for business women as it will be rough for big business. Resourceful, quick, and multitalented, they have the very skills the conglomerates most need, having juggled work with the care of elderly relatives, parents, siblings, husbands, and children. Working mothers accomplish the same amount as their male colleagues in less time in order to get to public day care centers before they close at 5 p.m.; with Japan's tight labor market and strict immigration polices, nannies are rare."* Working Woman, Women Break Through In Japan, 4/98

## Female Sexuality

***Legalization of Birth Control Pills:*** While most women in the world have had access to birth control pills for almost four decades, this has not been the case for women in Japan. The right for women to have control over their own sexuality and fertility was a key tenant of the US feminist movement in the 60's and birth control pills were approved by the FDA in 1961. In Japan, the question of birth control pills was seriously undertaken, beyond the use for treatment of medical problems, only approximately 9 years ago.

Many in Japanese society have accused the government of sexism and double standards, in light of the swift, six month, approval of Viagra in January of this year. On March 4, 1999 a Japanese government committee finally endorsed the sale of birth control pills[5]. Final approval must still be obtained from The Health Ministry of Japan and, though widely expected, it is not guaranteed. If approved as anticipated, birth control pills would become available by the end of the year

(Source: 1999 Associated Press, Japan Closer to Approving the Pill 9 Year Later, 3/4/99)

## General Societal Constraints

***Moral Code of Country:*** Acceptable female images in the US are very diverse. A woman can choose to portray herself in ways ranging from traditionally feminine to extremely alternative or anywhere in between. In Japan, society's images of women are much more tightly constrained.

*"Men here generally prefer their women cute, not sexy."* Source: Cosmopolitan, Forgotten Kimonos: Secret Lives Arise in Racy Club Attire, 11/93

Japanese women are exerting their sexuality to greater degrees than ever before as a way of asserting their independence. They are rebelling against societal mores and using their bodies and their sexuality as a way to make a statement. This phenomenon was prevalent among US women in the 60's and 70's. In today's US culture, anything goes. It appears that Japanese women are doing their best to catch up.

*"In a conformist society where women still play second fiddle to men and have few opportunities to shine outside the home, strutting your stuff has become an outlet for the frustration simmering inside many. 'They want to become a somebody, but they don't know how,' say Mari Mizuno, a writer studying female attitudes toward sex.*

*So, many women are stretching Japanese notions of female sexuality.... Baring the body before male onlookers serves as a declaration of deviation.*

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/kpwy0004

*Parading in risqué garb shows you have guts, or at least confidence in your looks, and all the attention provides a quick shot of self-esteem."* Source: Cosmopolitan, Forgotten Kimonos: Secret Lives Arise in Racy Club Attire 11/93

In conclusion, Japanese women are moving closer to the ideals, lifestyles and attitudes of women in America. Progress, though slow, is evident. Importantly, women in the US and Japan are at different stages of societal development. As such, they will react and behave differently, though reminiscently similar, from one another depending upon the stimuli they are responding to.

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